The President’s Job

GUIDE TO READING

Main Idea
In addition to the powers of the office described in the Constitution, the president fills other roles that are important to the functioning of the United States government.

Key Terms
executive order, pardon, reprieve, amnesty

Reading Strategy
Summarizing Information
As you read, in a graphic organizer like the one below, list the powers of the president and give an example of each.

Constitutional Powers
The president is the most powerful public official in the United States. The U.S. Constitution is the basis of the president’s power. Article II says “Executive Power shall be invested in a President . . .” Thus, the president’s main job is to execute, or carry out, the laws passed by Congress.

The Constitution also gives the president the power to
• veto, or reject, bills passed in Congress.
• call Congress into special session.
• serve as commander in chief of the armed forces.
• receive leaders and other officials of foreign countries.
• make treaties with other countries (with Senate approval).
• appoint heads of executive agencies, federal court judges, ambassadors, and other top government officials (also subject to Senate approval).
• pardon or reduce the penalties against people convicted of federal crimes.

Because the Constitution requires the president to give Congress information about the “state of the union,” the president gives several speeches to Congress each year. The most
important is the State of the Union address every year. In this speech the president comes before a gathering of all members of Congress to discuss the most important issues facing the nation and describe the new program of legislation he would like Congress to take up.

**Roles of the President**

The president fills a number of different roles. Some of these roles come directly from the Constitution; others are not established in the Constitution but have developed over the years.

**Chief Executive**

The most important role of the president is carrying out the laws passed by Congress. To do this, the president is in charge of 15 cabinet departments and the approximately 3 million civilians who work for the federal government. The president appoints the heads of the cabinet departments and of other large government agencies, with the Senate’s approval.

One of the president’s most important tools for carrying out the laws is the power to issue executive orders. An **executive order** is a rule or command that has the force of law. Only Congress has the authority to make laws. Issuing executive orders, however, is generally considered to fall under the president’s constitutional duty to “take care that the laws are faithfully executed.”

Many executive orders deal with simple administrative problems. Some, however, have had a great impact. President Harry S Truman, for instance, used an executive order in 1948 to integrate the armed forces. This gave Americans of all races the opportunity to serve in the armed forces equally.

The Constitution gives the president the power to appoint judges to the Supreme Court and other federal courts. This is an important power because the Supreme Court has the final authority to determine whether a law is acceptable under the Constitution. This power to interpret laws greatly influences life in the United States. Most presidents try to appoint Supreme Court justices who share views similar to their own.

The Constitution also gives the president the power to grant pardons. A **pardon** is a declaration of forgiveness and freedom from punishment. The president may also issue a **reprieve**, an order to delay a person’s punishment until a higher court can hear the case, or grant **amnesty**, a pardon toward a group of people.
Chief Diplomat

The president directs the foreign policy of the United States, making key decisions about how the United States acts toward other countries in the world.

Commander in Chief

The Constitution makes the president commander in chief of the nation’s armed forces. This role gives presidents the ability to back up their foreign policy decisions with force, if necessary. The president is in charge of the army, navy, air force, marines, and coast guard. The top commanders of all these branches of service are subordinate to the president.

Congress and the president share the power to make war. The Constitution gives Congress the power to declare war, but only the president can order American soldiers into battle. Congress has declared war only five times: the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II. Presidents, however, have sent troops into action overseas more than 150 times since 1789. These situations may threaten the system of checks and balances. For example, although Congress never declared war in Korea or in Vietnam, American troops were involved in conflicts in those countries because they were sent there by U.S. presidents. In 1973, after the Vietnam War, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution. According to this law, the president must notify Congress within 48 hours when troops are sent into battle. These troops must be brought home after 60 days unless Congress gives its approval for them to remain longer or it declares war.

Legislative Leader

Most of the bills Congress considers each year come from the executive branch. Only members of Congress have the power to introduce bills for consideration, but in practice Congress expects the executive branch to propose the legislation it would like to see enacted.

Every president has a legislative program. These are new laws that he wants Congress to pass. The president makes speeches to build support for this program and meets with key senators and representatives to try to persuade them to support the proposed laws. In addition, the president appoints several staff members to work closely with members of Congress on new laws. The president may also influence legislation by appealing directly to the American people.

The president and Congress have often disagreed over what new laws Congress should adopt. One reason for this is that presidents represent the entire United States, while members of Congress represent only the people of their state or district.

The difference in the length of time that presidents and members of Congress can hold office also contributes to this conflict. While presidents can serve no more than two elected terms, members of Congress can be elected over and over again for decades. Therefore, many members of Congress may not want to move as quickly on programs as the president does.

Head of State

The president is the living symbol of the nation. In this role, the president aids diplomacy by greeting visiting kings and queens, prime ministers, and other foreign leaders. The president also carries out ceremonial functions for Americans, such as lighting the national Christmas tree and giving medals to the country’s heroes.

Economic Leader

Every president tries to help the country’s economy prosper. Voters expect the president to deal with such problems as unemployment, rising prices, or high taxes.
Analyzing Visuals  During the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt transformed the role of the federal government by spending money on new programs to improve the lives of ordinary people. What does the rabbit symbolize in this cartoon? What comment is the cartoonist making about the impact of government spending?

One key task the president must accomplish each year as economic leader is to plan the federal government’s budget.

Party Leader

The president is generally regarded as the leader of his or her political party. Members of the president’s party work hard to elect the president. In turn, the president gives speeches to help fellow party members who are running for office as members of Congress, governors, and mayors. The president also helps the party raise money.

Critical Thinking

4. Drawing Conclusions  Which of the roles of the president do you think is the most important? Least important? Why?

5. Organizing Information  In a web diagram like the one below, classify the roles filled by the president and give an example of each.

Roles of President

Analyzing Visuals

6. Contrast  Review the chart on page 172. How does the role of head of state differ from that of chief diplomat?

BE AN ACTIVE CITIZEN

7. Use Primary Sources  Just as the president delivers a State of the Union address, most governors give a state of the state speech. Read a copy of your governor’s last address and list the roles your governor carries out.